NOT AS MORTALS SEE
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 133
Mark 1:16–20
1 Samuel 16:1–13

"For the Lord does not see as mortals see;
they look on the outward appearance,
but the Lord looks on the heart."
1 Samuel 16:7 (NRSV)

Christian dignity comes from dwelling in the being of God, rather than from self-expression.
Coming to know God enables us to understand ourselves properly and with greater nobility
and happiness than our own abilities can muster, for we are in the divine image. . . .
We come to understand the purpose of life not in terms of our own desires, but in terms of
the wisdom of God as we turn to the adoration of God and away from self-gratification. . . .
It is not that our self is not important, but that in finding our identity in God we turn into a self
whose joy is now from and for God. This, rather than a self bent on self-gratification, is a self
that is truly and genuinely for itself, its best self.

Ellen T. Charry
The Crisis of Modernity and the Christian Self

We come before you in listening reverence, O God. Now silence in us any voice but your own,
so that out of all the loud noises of our busy life we might hear a word you have for us today;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When a new nation is trying to be born, it needs a hero, a mythic figure, not only to lead it through difficult and dangerous times, but to gather up and express the nation's aspirations and its vision of itself. In his excellent biography of George Washington, *His Excellency: George Washington*,

Joseph Ellis argues that the unlikely success of the Continental Army and militia in the War for Independence, against the British Army—the finest, strongest, and largest fighting force in the world—is inconceivable apart from Washington: not merely his military strategy, which wasn't always great, but his stature, his presence, his attractiveness, his steady, unwavering courage, his confidence, and the way he seemed simply to embody the patriot cause.

David is that kind of hero, a mystic figure for ancient Israel, which was in the process of becoming a nation. His story may be found in the Old Testament book of First Samuel, chapter 16, through the end of that book, all of Second Samuel, and into First Kings. It makes for a wonderful read—literally a biblical soap opera. It could be a TV miniseries. It has everything: violence, betrayal, sex, romance, murder, guilt, victory, and perhaps the most poignant cry of grief in all of literature, Absalom, O Absalom, O my son Absalom!" (For the record, Absalom is David's son who turns against him, leads an attempted coup, and is killed by David's most trusted friend and general.)

Joseph Heller wrote an irreverent and whimsical novel about David, *God Knows*. In it, David says, "I don't like to boast, but I honestly think I have the best story in the Bible. Old Sarah's fun, Abraham is ever up to the mark, Moses isn't bad I have to admit, but he's very, very long with all those laws. Moses has the Ten Commandments, it's true, but I have better lines. I've got the poetry and the passion."

Read it, but preferably not now. First Samuel 16. It's a Bible story everybody should know.

I want to think this morning about the way the story begins and what it suggests about the human condition and about God and about God's way with us.

Israel's first king, Saul, is about done. God tells the prophet Samuel to get a new king, to go to Bethlehem, in fact, and visit Jesse and find the new king from among his sons. And when he finds the new king, Samuel is instructed to anoint him on the spot. So Samuel goes to Bethlehem and calls on Jesse and asks to see his sons. One by one they pass by. The first one, Eliab, is very impressive. He looks like a king. "Surely this is the one," Samuel thinks. God says, "Don't be so impressed with his size. Keep looking." All seven sons pass by and Samuel asks Jesse, "Are there any others?" "No," Jesse says. "Well, actually, yes. There's one more, but he's just a boy and he's out tending the sheep." So young David is summoned. God says to Samuel, "He's the one. Anoint him."

And so the story begins with an unlikely choice. In the very next chapter, David, who is on an errand delivering lunch to his soldier big brothers, finds them cowering in fear before Goliath, the champion of the enemy Philistines. David volunteers to fight Goliath, persuades King Saul, tries on Saul's armor, and, in a wonderfully whimsical scene, can't walk, let alone fight, because he's just a boy. So he goes up against Goliath with a slingshot and five smooth stones—and wins. The patron saint of all underdogs, someone calls him. He will soothe King Saul with his singing and lyre playing. He will love the king's son, Jonathan. He will become king and do the unthinkable: unite the tribes of Israel into a fighting force, take Jerusalem, create a strong nation, establish a monarchy. He will watch a beautiful woman bathing, Bathsheba, send for her, and, when she becomes pregnant, he will arrange for her husband, one of his most loyal soldiers, to die in battle. He will marry Bathsheba, be confronted by Nathan, the prophet, and confess his sin. His confession is Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; blot out my transgression." The child will die. David's grief will be intense. Another child is born, Solomon, his heir. David's fortunes will wax and wane until his son Absalom turns against him. He will die an old man, Israel's greatest king, and his distant relative, generations later, will be Jesus of Nazareth, born, as he was, in Bethlehem.

What a story. "Do not look on his appearance; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." This is first of all about a God who knows better than anyone, better than we ourselves, what is inside us; knows the unrealized potential, the untapped possibilities in our hearts. I have come to the conclusion that among the most important people in our lives were those who made us uncomfortable by expecting more of us than we were producing. I have come to the conclusion that our saints are those who saw more in us than we ever saw in ourselves, the ones who forced the issue of who we are and who we can be: the teacher, the coach, the parent, the mentor who called us out, who called out of us something we didn't even know was in there. Old Samuel missed it, but God didn't and God doesn't. God saw the heart of a king in a little boy. God sees your heart and mine. God wants us to become and to be all that we can.

And this is about power, power in weakness. Walter Brueggemann says this is not merely a story of a boy who becomes king, an underdog who wins; it is about God and the way God chooses unconventional ways and unexpected people to get things done in the world.

President Bush last week laid a wreath at the monument in Budapest that honors the brave Hungarian patriots who rose up against the overwhelming power of the occupying Soviet military in 1956, who died but whose cause ultimately won. And I thought about how history teaches that lesson: that

there is no power on earth that ultimately can crush the human spirit. I thought about Nazi Germany, with every conventional weapon at its disposal, yet its inability to defeat the will and spirit of courageous people, who joined the resistance, about its ultimate impotence in the face of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I thought about Tiananmen Square, Solidarity in Poland. I thought about the churches in East Germany, the candlelight processions streaming from the churches of Leipzig in the face of tanks and guns and how weak they seemed—and how they were ultimately victorious. I thought about barbed wire and checkpoints and klieg lights and machine guns—and the German people climbing up on the wall in the face of it all and tearing it down brick by brick.

One scholar observes, “From the biblical point of view, what the world sees as abject weakness, may be, in the final analysis, utter strength. . . . In God’s kingdom, the weak are strong, and the strong are weak” (*The Lectionary Commentary*, p. 186).

While we were in Birmingham, we visited the Civil Rights Institute, a museum of the Civil Rights movement and particularly the story of Birmingham, the epicenter of the conflict. Birmingham, where Martin Luther King was jailed and wrote a letter to white ministers who asked him to stop precipitating racial conflict. Birmingham, where the police commissioner, Bull Connor, unleashed dogs and powerful water cannons on defenseless demonstrators, and where students sitting at lunch counters surrounded by angry mobs were taunted and abused. The world watched on television, horrified, as the power of the state, a state whose segregation laws were reinforced by courts, police, national guard—all the power of government—was confronted by individuals carefully trained in nonresistance, unarmed, weak by comparison with the forces arrayed against them, armed only with truth and justice and their own courage.

In striking contrast to pictures and videos of police with dogs and bullhorns and nightsticks and guns are pictures of people sitting in a church, listening to ministers talk—Martin Luther King, Fred Shuttlesworth—telling them that in their weakness they were actually like Jesus, who became weak in order to be strong, who suffered to save, who died, alone, abandoned, the very picture of vulnerability, to overcome the power of death; people sitting quietly in church listening to the preachers tell them that in their weakness they were actually powerful, far more powerful than anyone realized, even themselves; assuring them that there was nothing to fear because God was on their side, the God who uses unlikely ways and people to get things done, who turns slaves into victors, a God who chooses a little boy to be king, a Lord who calls fisherman to be disciples and builds a church on them, a God who uses a death on a cross to defeat the power of death.

At the end of the museum you come to a big window that looks out at that church, the 16th Street Baptist Church.

On September 15, 1963, a Sunday morning, a bomb exploded at that church and four little girls, sitting in their Sunday School class, died. I'll never forget it. It was a turning point for the nation and for many of us. It affected me deeply. I had been ordained for three months. I had two young daughters, four and two. I had the luxury of speaking about equal justice from the relative safety of northern Indiana and taking them to Sunday School without fearing for their safety. But little girls, little African American girls, the very embodiment of weakness and innocence, died in Birmingham, in my country.

Not for a minute do I believe God had a hand in that. But I do believe the God who uses the small and weak and unlikely did use that terrible event to further the kingdom of justice and peace. It wasn't long after that the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act of 1964 was passed and President Lyndon Johnson, on national television, unforgettably, took the title of the anthem of the Civil Rights movement and said, "We Shall Overcome."

A final personal vignette. I have never forgotten that event and what it meant to me, never forgotten those four little girls, and I was deeply touched, after all these years, to see the place, the church, where it had happened. The next day, Father's Day, last Sunday, I received a lovely bouquet of flowers. I enjoyed them all week in the hotel room. They were still fresh and beautiful on Wednesday, the last day, so I took them along to the last event before we headed for Chicago, a McCormick Seminary lunch. I placed them in the middle of a table and left them there for anyone to enjoy. As we were leaving the hotel about thirty minutes later, a McCormick staff person caught up with me and said he thought I might like to know what happened to my flowers.

It seems that Bridget Greene, an African American young woman who works for our church, stopped by the McCormick lunch for a bite to eat. Afterward, while greeting old friends, she told someone that she had discovered that the little girls who died on September 15, 1963, were buried in a cemetery near the Birmingham airport. Their story, their sacrifice, had always meant a great deal to her, and so she planned to visit their graves on her way to the airport. She was running a little late, she said, and so wouldn't have time to go to a florist and buy flowers to place on the little girl's graves, so she would just go and say a prayer. Someone pointed to my flowers and told her I wouldn't mind at all if she took them. So my Father's Day flowers, forty-three years later, ended up on the graves of those little girls.

The Lord said to Samuel: “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Thanks be to God.